



A new study has revealed that more healthy children than ever before are trying to lose weight. So what can be done, asks **Elizabeth Archer**

**A**s families prepare to send their children back to school, concerning research has revealed that the relationship between young people and food is at an all-time low.

A new study by the University of Oxford found that over a quarter of children aged eight to 17 were trying to lose weight in 2015-6, compared to a decade earlier.

"Alarming, the data showed that an increasing proportion of children with a healthy weight reported trying to lose it," said Dr Aryati Ahmad, co-lead author of the study.

"This raises concerns, and suggests greater attention is needed to target weight-control messages appropriately."

Nutritionist Natalie Burrows is worried by the trend.

"If children start dieting and only eat low-calorie foods, they can lose out on nutrients required for them to grow," she says.

"They may miss out on healthy fats which naturally have a higher calorie load than other foods, but are vital for healthy brains, hormones and joints. Girls especially need healthy fats in their diets to help their sex hormone development and to have healthy periods.

"What's more, if we encourage children to diet, they stop listening to their body about how much food they need."

According to the study, one contributing factor could be that in 2010 parents started receiving individual feedback on their child's weight for the first time as part of the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP).

Children are weighed and their BMI calculated at ages four and 11, and the information is fed into a national database.

Parents are sent a letter telling them whether their child is considered underweight, healthy, overweight or obese.

Ed Emond, of eating disorder charity Beat, has "significant concerns" about the NCMP.

"Sorting children into categories by weight creates a mindset that weight is something which needs to be controlled," he says.

"Even if the children don't read the letter, it's likely to affect the way their parents talk about food. This is worrying, as restricting what we eat can trigger eating disorders."

Anupa Roper, 44, a former teacher-turned-children's



**CONCERN**  
Amy's son wouldn't eat dinner after food lesson

# The worrying rise of child dieters



**“**If children diet they can lose out on the nutrients required for them to grow

author (sparrowlegs.com), asked for her children not to be weighed.

"My son felt embarrassed he was the only one in his class not being weighed," says Anupa, who lives in Countesthorpe, Leicestershire, with husband Greg, 49, a business development manager, and their children, Maya, 13, and Ayden, 11.

"But I know how he eats and how much he moves, and that's all that matters to me."

She says growing up in British Indian culture, her family had a different attitude to food. "Food was associated with love, and wasn't seen as something to restrict," she says. "But we put thinness on a pedestal, and it means we don't look at the bigger picture of our health." While the



**REFUSAL**  
Anupa Roper didn't want kids weighed

study looked at children aged eight to 17, Vie Portland, who runs self-esteem and confidence workshops in schools (vieness.co.uk), believes the problem with children dieting starts as young as five.

"Over half of five-year-olds in this country know how to diet," she says. "I hear from parents that very young children won't have a biscuit until they've done 20 laps of the garden because of what they've been taught at school."

Mum-of-two Amy Bates reveals her son began showing concerning

behaviour at four. The body image educator (beautyrebellion.co.uk) is 37 and lives in Birmingham with husband Adam, 41, a carpenter,

and their children, Riley, nine, and Cady, six.

At four, Riley suddenly started refusing to eat his dinner. "He wouldn't eat fish fingers, and said his teacher told him they were bad for him," she says.

She spoke to the teacher, and discovered Riley had been learning about healthy eating in school. He'd taken the lessons too literally, and thought it was only OK to eat fruit and vegetables.

Then this year, aged nine, the problem got worse when he learnt about calories and fats. "Riley tries to avoid high-calorie foods even though

## TALKING TO KIDS ABOUT FOOD

Nutritionist Natalie Burrows says:

### Eat the rainbow

This encourages children to eat a range of nutrients as the different colours we see are associated with different vitamins and minerals. It's also a fun way to engage children in talking about nutrition as they'll enjoy counting the different colours on their plates.

### Listen to the body

Ask "How hungry are you on a scale of one to five?" Allow children to choose their portions based on how hungry they are. Children who struggle with overeating can start with a smaller portion but let them go back for more if they're hungry.

### Fat isn't the enemy

While it's easy to think that all fatty foods are bad for us, explain to children that healthy fats are vital for their growing bodies and brains. Encourage them to eat good fats such as avocado, oily fish and nuts to get the nutrients they need.

### Food as fuel

Kids may pick up the idea from adults that calories are bad, and we should eat as few of them as possible. But encourage them to think about calories as vital energy for running around, playing after-school sports and learning in class.

he's a healthy weight as he takes what the teachers say as gospel," says Amy.

"It's frustrating as we're having to re-educate him at home.

"He plays a lot of football and needs to fuel his body well."

Elsewhere, mum-of-four Nina Spencer began to worry about her daughter Jessica at four years old too.

Twins Jessica and Mason, four, and twins Melody and Jake, 10, all eat the same food at mealtimes.

Yet Nina was sent a letter saying Jessica was overweight, while the others were told they were healthy.

"I tried to shield Jessica from it but she saw me opening the letter – she thinks there's something wrong with her but she's a perfectly healthy child," says

Nina, 42, a motherhood coach (ninaspencer.com). She lives in Nottingham with her husband Chris, 52, who works in security.

Ed Emond believes there should be more positive messages in healthy eating lessons at school. "There should be more messaging about food

nourishing children to grow and fuel their bodies, rather than something to restrict," he says.

And Vee agrees.

"Food should be about nourishment and enjoyment – not punishment," she says.



**WORRY**  
The Spencer family